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Small Schools: What's Small?

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SMALL SCHOOLS: WHAT'S SMALL?

matt gladden

the chicago small schools study
at bank street college
and the consortium on chicago school research

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MATT GLADDEN has a dual role at the Consortium on Chicago School Research. Half of his time is focused on a study of small schools in Chicago conducted by Bank Street College in collaboration with the Consortium. The other half is spent providing research assistance to a myriad of Consortium projects. He is interested in the construction of small, intimate learning communities and the relationship between community and school experiences. Matt received his B.A. from Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and is in the process of completing his Ph.D. in social/personality psychology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

All over the country, school systems are looking for viable solutions to raise student achievement. Recently, the Chicago Small Schools Study, led by Patricia Wasley, Dean of Bank Street College, has been studying one potential solution that has gained credibility and momentum in several cities: the creation of smaller schools. As we began to look for evidence of the links between school size and student academic achievement, we noticed that small schools mean many things to many people. Moreover, the local contexts surrounding small schools, resources, ideas, and resistance have shaped how teachers, administrators, and community members organize their small schools. For instance, advocates of small schools have created smaller schools inside existing school buildings, opened up new schools inside churches or community centers, or sought charters to operate their schools outside the regulations imposed by large central bureaucracies. The small-schools movement has challenged traditional notions about physical space and administration. Defining terms and sorting out the defining characteristics of small schools might help us to understand better how the idea of smaller school size is being implemented and modified by educators in urban areas.

This paper represents our effort to examine the question of what constitutes a small school. In the first section, we explore why educators are founding new small schools. Second, we attempt to document the diverse range of small schools that flourish throughout Chicago. Although we focus on Chicago throughout this paper, the diverse types of small schools found in Chicago confront many of the same problems and issues faced by small schools in other cities. Building from the observations in this section, we seek to identify characteristics that delineate small schools and provide them the opportunity to improve students' educational experiences. We conclude by challenging the quest by school districts and researchers to define an "ideal" school size.

SMALLER SCHOOL SIZE AS A NATIONAL ISSUE

Reformers (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Meier, 1995), researchers (Fine, 1994; Klonsky, 1995; Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997), and educators (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1996) increasingly argue that

smaller school size is a key ingredient in improving public education, especially for minority and socially disadvantaged students. This turn to smallness is driven by the belief that civil, personal relationships among students, teachers, and parents are a prerequisite to learning:

Small may be a necessary condition for a nonselective high school to excel. Small is necessary if teachers are to have rich conversations with one another about practice, policy, inquiry, and student work. Small is necessary if students are to feel attached to each other and to faculty. Small is necessary if parents are to connect to faculty along lines other than, "Your son/daughter is in trouble again." (Fine, 1998, p.4)

Instead of viewing schools as sites where teachers deliver curriculum to students based on their students' perceived skill level or categorization, such as special education or honors student, advocates of small schools believe that schools are sites where students build personal and intellectual connections (Meier, 1995; Wasley et al., 1997). Smaller school size provides more chances for students and teachers to interact and establish stronger relationships. These relationships help teachers and students prevent discipline problems and enable teachers to respond more efficiently to students' intellectual strengths and weaknesses (Meier, 1995).

Smaller school size also offers the opportunity for teachers to work more closely with their colleagues. Teachers inside a small school can discuss, debate, and coordinate the school's curriculum; quickly respond to problems inside the school; and build a strong and consistent academic focus across grades. When smaller schools work, teachers and students create and become involved in a community focused on learning.

Recent research has begun to support the preceding arguments and suggest that smaller schools, on average, outperform large schools on several measures (Gladden, 1998; Klonsky, 1995). Smaller school size is consistently related to stronger and safer school communities (Franklin & Crone, 1992; Zane, 1994). Compared to larger schools, students in smaller schools fight less, feel safer, come to school more frequently, and report being more attached to their school (Gottfredson, 1985). Teachers also report better collegial relationships in

smaller schools (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). The potential for stronger personal relationships in small schools sometimes provides the foundation for improvements in teaching and student learning. Although not all small schools enhance the educational opportunities afforded students (Fine & Somerville, 1998), on average, students attending smaller schools complete more years of higher education (Sares, 1992), accumulate more credit (Fine, 1994; Oxley, 1995), and score slightly better on standardized tests than students attending larger schools (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Fine, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1996; Sares, 1992). In addition, the achievement gap between students with high socioeconomic backgrounds (SES) and students with low SES within a school has been found to be narrower in small schools compared to larger schools (Lee, Smith, & Croniger, 1995).

A recent study of small high schools in New York has challenged the commonly held assumption that larger schools cost less than smaller schools due to their economies of scale. Although small academic high schools cost more to operate per student than larger schools, small academic high schools graduate a higher percentage of their students and cost among the least per graduate of all New York City high schools (Stiefel, Iatarola, Fruchter, & Berne, 1998). Linking costs with student outcomes demonstrates that small academic high schools provide a cost-effective method for educating students.

THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT TOWARD SMALL SCHOOLS

Responding to the success of small schools, educators and communities have founded new small schools across the country. The movement toward smaller school size has been especially strong in urban areas such as Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. In cities like these, smaller school size is a strategy to engage students, revitalize failing schools, and increase the academic performance of minority students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, in Philadelphia, the movement toward small schools has been systemwide. Aided by a large grant from Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia's 22 large public high schools have been partially or completely broken down into small schools-within-a-building (SWBs), called charters in

Philadelphia, where 10 to 12 teachers work with 200 to 400 students over four years (Fine, 1994).

In Chicago, the Small Schools Workshop, a reform organization working out of the University of Illinois, Leadership for a Quality Education, and Business People for the Public Interest (BPI), is helping schools to create small schools and SWBs. As part of a new accountability policy initiated by the Chicago Public Schools in 1996, a large number of elementary and high schools have been placed on probation or reconstituted (i.e., closed and opened again) due to their chronic poor standardized test performance. The Small Schools Workshop has entered into partnerships with some of these schools and is assisting them to reorganize by dividing themselves into SWBs. The small-schools movement in Chicago is dedicated to bringing the advantages of smaller school size to the historically disadvantaged students in Chicago.

During the 1970s in New York, Tony Alvarado, then superintendent of District 4 in New York City, and his colleagues wanted to encourage talented teachers to create schools that might better engage children's interests. These schools were formed around a particular theme or focus. The central idea was that parents from around the city could choose to send their children to these schools, and that in them students would engage more deeply because they were interested in the stated focus of the school. Some 450 schools were created and, based on their successes, additional schools were begun. Soon, other districts within New York City began similar efforts. Independent organizations like New Visions for Public Education and the Center for Collaborative Education have developed to provide support for these new schools (Fine & Wasley, 1999).

Educators are increasingly turning to smaller school size, both as a way to improve the quality of education and, in light of recent events of violence in schools, enhance safety, especially for urban students. Focusing on Chicago, this paper will explore the rich and diverse types of small schools that have emerged from educators' and communities' efforts to create smaller schools. Although we focus on Chicago, we believe that the struggles to create and define small schools in that city will be helpful to educators grappling with building and sustaining small schools nationally.

SMALL SCHOOLS IN CHICAGO

Educators and communities in Chicago have tried to capitalize on the advantages of small schools through three primary organizational strategies: creating free-standing small schools; forming charters; and breaking down existing larger schools into small schools-within-a-building (SWBs). By examining the diverse types of small schools, we hope to gain insights into the characteristics of these schools that make them beneficially “small.”

FREESTANDING SMALL SCHOOLS

The majority of research on school size focuses on freestanding small schools. These schools are housed in their own building, have their own principal, are officially recognized by their district as a school, have their own budget, and serve a small student body. Most researchers label elementary schools that serve fewer than 350 students and high schools that serve fewer than 500 students as “small” (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Klonsky, 1995; Sares, 1992). Chicago has more than 45 small elementary schools that predate the push to create small schools over the last decade, as well as a few new small elementary schools that were founded as part of the recent small-schools movement.

In our experience, some educators in Chicago argue that the 45 historic small schools are not “small” because they were not specifically designed to take advantage of their smaller size. Regardless of their origin, all freestanding small schools possess a common set of teachers, students, space, and decision-making power that facilitates their ability to shape a strong school community. On a range of school outcomes, such as student achievement and student engagement, historical small schools outperformed other Chicago public elementary schools even after controlling for the composition of their student body (Sebring, Bryk, Roderick, & Camburn, 1996). The stronger personal relationships found in historical small schools versus other elementary schools, coupled with their higher levels of achievement, suggest that these schools have taken advantage of their smaller size to improve students’ educational opportunities.

The few new freestanding small elementary schools differ from historic small schools in that they often have external partners and tend to target more

“at-risk” students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The logistical obstacles facing a new school are immense: securing space, hiring staff, recruiting students, building relationships with parents and the community, constructing a curriculum, and creating a school vision. These forces may create a fragile and shifting school environment that impedes the school’s short-term success. Even when these issues are dealt with successfully, a school may take a few years to take advantage of its smaller school size and establish a strong community of teachers and students. The fact that only a few small freestanding elementary schools have been founded over the past decade testifies to how difficult it is for a small school in Chicago to secure its own space and resources.

These small schools have close external partners such as community groups, universities, or business groups that helped them found their school. These partners have been instrumental in securing recognition and funding from CPS and from a range of other resources. Although the partners supply substantial resources and technical assistance, the small schools may experience difficult negotiations with their partners over the extent to which the school and the partner share the power to make school and curricular decisions. The close relationship between school and partner can be both an asset and a struggle.

CHARTERS

In an effort to improve schools in Illinois, the state created 17 five-year charter opportunities in Chicago and across the state by the end of 1999. The charters enable schools to operate independently of school-board regulations even though they are funded with public tax money. The schools are bound to the public school system by accountability procedures detailed in their five-year contract. Some small schools that struggled to survive inside the system perceived the charters as an opportunity to implement their vision free from bureaucratic requirements or other administrative resistance. Groups seeking charters had to overcome the difficult obstacle of finding and financing their own space and setting up their own administration.

CREATING SMALL SCHOOLS INSIDE LARGE BUILDINGS

Another strategy used to create small schools has been to divide large schools, either partially or completely, into smaller schools. Due to the resource demands of creating a new freestanding school, more than 90 percent of the small schools in Chicago are located inside larger school buildings. This strategy offers an affordable method to quickly convert existing school buildings into safer, more productive, and diverse sets of small schools (Oxley, 1994; Raywid, 1995). Until school districts commit money to build small school buildings instead of large school buildings (Public Education Association, 1992), advocates of small schools are heavily reliant on external funding to acquire, create, and sustain new freestanding small schools and therefore tend to create small schools within preexisting large schools. Moreover, creating small schools inside larger school buildings enables small-school advocates to change the experiences of urban students and revitalize large failing schools now, instead of waiting for policy changes or external assistance.

Small schools inside buildings in Chicago are organized in two different ways: multiplexes, and schools-within-a-building (SWBs).

multiplexes

Multiplexes describe small schools that share a building but operate independently from one another. In this model, a number of small schools are housed in the same building where they share physical space (e.g., auditorium), building resources (e.g., custodial staff), and administrative resources (e.g., principal). Each small school, however, operates as a freestanding school. Each has its own space, budget, teaching staff, and vision, and is officially recognized by the Chicago Public School system. Therefore, these schools enjoy almost the same degree of autonomy as a freestanding small school.

In 1995, Chicago renovated two large school buildings and sent out a Request for Proposal for small schools that wanted their own space. One multiplex hosts three small schools (two elementary and one high school), and the other hosts two high schools. The small schools whose proposals were approved

received their own budget and unit number once they moved into their respective multiplexes in 1996. In an effort to efficiently use administrative resources and space, the small schools share one principal and the common spaces in the school, such as the gym. The multiplex principals have the difficult role of supporting the unique vision of each small school, negotiating conflicts among the schools, ensuring that each one meets CPS requirements, and providing strong administrative support to the individual schools. Like freestanding schools, the small schools located in the multiplexes had to garner substantial resources in addition to board funds to start their schools. Although the small schools in the multiplexes are officially recognized as schools, the multiplexes are under constant scrutiny. They are continually justifying their structure to the broader community and CPS because they are new.

schools-within-a-building (swb)

Unlike multiplexes, most SWBs negotiate their structure on a school-by-school basis with the principal, Local School Council (LSC), and teachers. Usually, teachers working inside a larger school who share a common vision start the SWB, and/or they are started by principals who believe that dividing their school into smaller schools will improve the learning climate and the quality of instruction at their school. Reform organizations such as the Small Schools Workshop, business groups such as Business People for the Public Interest, and the Chicago Teachers' Union Quest Center have been instrumental in starting and supporting many of the SWBs. Some elementary and high schools have deliberately reorganized their schools into small schools to promote revitalization. More often, one or a few small schools have grown more organically inside their larger schools as teachers or a principal pushed to implement their visions of education. In some schools, the success of one SWB has led the larger school to create more SWBs. Working to shape the structure and functions of their schools to fit the needs and interests of their students instead of the other way around, the SWBs' curriculum, themes, and organization vary greatly. For instance, some of the schools use direct instruction techniques, while others focus on group learning.

The Chicago Public Schools do not officially recognize the SWBs as separate schools, and consequently the SWBs do not have their own budget or hiring authority. But they often do operate as independent schools, creating their own curriculum, enforcing discipline, and scheduling classes. The survival and prosperity of an SWB depends on the constant support of the teachers in the SWB, the school principal, the LSC, and parents. Concerted resistance from any of these four groups can undermine a new SWB. The SWBs are especially vulnerable to principal changes. This is a critical problem because many of the schools serving the most disadvantaged students in Chicago experience high levels of principal turnover. For instance, 58 percent of the schools that have 95 percent or more of their student body receiving free lunches had two or more principals over a six-year period. Some small schools have been eliminated during administrative changes because a new principal withdrew support. The predominance of this kind of turnover in leadership creates enormous tension in new small schools.

What we have in Chicago is really only an experiment—there are no guarantees that these small schools, even the most successful ones, won't one day be merged into larger ones in the next few years. But it is an experiment being watched with great scrutiny and caution by local, state, and national officials as well as all the observers walking through classrooms. (Joravsky, p.2)

SWBs face the difficult task of creating their own identities while maintaining their links to their larger host schools. One researcher commented on the complex tasks confronted by SWBs, called charters in Philadelphia:

The work of creating charters within existing schools is markedly different from creating new schools, alternative schools, or privatized schools with eager, "willing" volunteers (students, teachers, and/or parents). Creating rich educational settings within existing bureaucracies, educators and parents must juggle the contradictions and invent educational possibilities in the midst of constraints and resistance. Trying to nurture educational communities amidst the crusty, fragmented organizations we have called urban high schools requires that parents and educators who are front-runners do double duty. They do "what is," create "what could be," transform "what has been" in their school, and they press for systemic transformation. In the process, they

°°offend almost every vested interest, and former friend, at some point. Once taboo, still heretical challenges arise regularly about the role of the central district, the need for school-based resources and decisions, the necessity for assistant principals, the schoolwide function of counselors, the standard practice of “bumping teachers,” the right of teachers to interview/hire their colleagues, and so forth. (Fine, 1994, p. 25)

WHOM DO SMALL SCHOOLS SERVE?

When we analyzed, the student composition of the historic small elementary schools and the new small elementary schools founded over the last decade, we found that historic small schools serve a more selective and affluent student population than the average public elementary school. The new small elementary schools, by contrast, tend to serve a student population similar to that of the average public elementary school. Historic small schools are more likely to select their students based on previous academic performance; as a matter of fact, 23 percent of the historic small schools are academic magnets. Second, historic small schools educate more affluent students. In historic small schools, the average income of students’ home census tract (i.e., where students live) is \$31,050. In contrast, the average median income for the average CPS elementary school student’s home census tract is \$24,365. The recent movement toward small schools in Chicago challenges this tradition and is working to provide the advantages of small schools to traditionally low-income students. The average income of students’ home census tract is only \$21,814 for new small schools identified by small-school groups in Chicago.

On a national level, private and Catholic schools are uniformly smaller than their public schools counterparts (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). More affluent families in many places take for granted that their children will attend small schools where their teachers and other students know them. For instance, Catholic secondary schools on average serve 546 students. In contrast, public secondary schools serve 845. Moreover, only 15 percent of Catholic secondary schools serve more than 900 students, while 40 percent of public secondary schools serve more than 900 students. Smaller school size fosters a more person-

alized learning environment and equitable achievement in Catholic schools compared to public schools (Bryk et al., 1993). The small-schools movement in Chicago and other larger urban cities is working to counteract this trend and bring the advantages of small school size to urban students from poorer economic communities.

WHAT IS A SMALL SCHOOL?

A variety of innovative organizational strategies are being used in Chicago to create small schools. As more small schools have been created, debate and confusion over what constitutes a small school has spread. For instance, a few of Chicago's high schools are underenrolled due to their chronic safety and performance problems. Some critics of small schools point to these schools to support their claim that small schools do not work. However, advocates of small schools argue that these schools were not designed to be small and are small only because they are failing. Moreover, during our field work, we discovered that some SWBs operated like small schools and others operated as programs or departments. Teachers inside the same school disagreed over whether an SWB was a program or a school. In 1997, elementary and high school teachers throughout Chicago were asked by the Consortium on Chicago School Research if their school contained a small school. In 43 elementary schools and 16 high schools, less than 75 percent of teachers in a school answered in a consistent fashion. The confusion over the definition of a small school made the delineation of organizational characteristics associated with small schools a task of our research.

Some small-school advocates, however, argue that defining small schools may have the negative consequence of limiting the creativity and hope of educators. If educators create smaller groupings of students within a school and work to craft a small community, why should researchers impose external criteria on them? According to one study, there "are many ways to grow and sustain small schools. The diverse passions, creativity, and visions of teachers, students, parents, and community members are perhaps the most essential elements of all" (Fine & Somerville, 1998, p.104). Moreover, a restricted definition of small schools that demands a small school have its own budget, lead teacher, or principal may

discourage teachers and communities from trying to start small schools.

Encouraging diversity and flexibility in the structure of small schools is important because it enables educators to respond creatively to their specific circumstances and increases children's access to small schools. New small schools, however, also need to preserve the important characteristics of historical small schools, such as close professional and social interactions among teachers and students, that improve the educational experiences of small-school students and teachers. Otherwise, new small schools run the risk of replicating and inheriting the problems of larger schools. Research has shown that how well SWBs are implemented inside a school is related to the positive benefits experienced by its students (McCabe & Oxley, 1989; McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994; Raywid, 1995). We wish to identify a set of characteristics that cross all of the various small schools in order to support those who wish to build small schools and highlight the effort needed to transform a school program into a small school.

Moreover, a definition of small schools provides a guidepost for groups creating new small schools and enables groups to make consistent demands on central bureaucracies for support. In Philadelphia, one teacher's concern about breaking down his/her larger school into smaller schools was that the reform "will be implemented hastily and true goals will be lost" (Philadelphia Education Fund, p. 95). With all reforms, a strong and consistent focus on what the reform is trying to achieve and the organizational changes necessary to implement the reform are critical to its success.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SMALL SCHOOLS

Five characteristics delineated small schools in Chicago: intent; stable teaching staff; stable students; contiguous space; and vision.

intent

Most research on small schools has focused primarily on freestanding schools that have been identified by their small enrollment. We found, however, defining small schools based solely on their enrollment is problematic because not all schools are intentionally small. In addition to small enrollment, the administrators and

teachers of a small school have to value smaller school size to the extent that they work to maintain smaller school size against other demands made on them. Rather than viewing small school size as accidental, educators in small schools see it as a critical element contributing to the identity and success of their school.

Although most small schools are intentionally designed to be small (i.e., the building is meant to hold a small number of students), some schools become small not by design or choice. Instead, their low enrollment results from chronic poor performance, an unsafe school community, or depopulation of the community they serve. For instance, the enrollment of one chronically low-performing high school in Chicago dropped by one third over a nine-year period, from approximately 1200 student to 800 students. Although this high school now falls within the ideal size for a high school (600 to 900 students) suggested by recent research (Lee & Smith, 1997), small school size and shrinking enrollment in this instance is a proxy for collapse, not for community. A massively underenrolled school is not a small school.

In other instances, a program may appear to be an SWB because it serves a small number of students and is administered by a small group of teachers. The small size of the program, however, may be attributable to its serving only one grade of students or being a pilot for a schoolwide initiative. In these instances, the substance of the program is unrelated to its small size, and the smaller size of the program may disappear as the needs of the program evolve. "Smallness" is not seen as essential.

These problems with the enrollment definition of small schools can be addressed by defining small schools in terms of intent as well as size. An intentional small school is a school designed to educate a small number of students. For freestanding small schools, the actual physical structure of the school constantly presses people into interactions: "In small schools everybody knows everyone's business. Irksome, but also critical to rearing the young" (Meier, p.112). When students and teachers interact in a small space, the teachers and students share a common set of problems and successes. Moreover, problems within the school become more personal, tangible, and difficult to ignore.

stable teaching staff

Many of the organizational features of freestanding small schools have to be negotiated and implemented in SWBs. Realizing the importance of distinguishing SWBs from other activities inside schools, we identified four characteristics in addition to small enrollment and intent that help define an SWB: stable teaching staff, stable students, contiguous space, and a vision.

SWBs require a stable group of teachers who are able to work together over time. This entails creating conditions that allow teachers in SWBs to teach only students in their small school. Changes in student enrollment or teacher staffing in the larger school or SWB may precipitate the principal's moving teachers in and out of the small school, or having them teach classes in multiple small schools. This practice erodes the links and community feelings between teachers and students (McMullan, 1994). The problem of maintaining a stable teacher core is even more difficult at the high school level because of the departmentalization of high schools, a structure that forces small schools to recruit teachers based on their certification instead of common beliefs, and often creates a dual authority structure:

In some schools the roster office has been neither committed to, nor adept at, maintaining each charter's boundaries. In practical terms, students and teachers who have chosen to attach themselves to a particular charter have found themselves assigned to classes with either unaffiliated students or students in other charters....Not surprisingly, teachers were worried that continuing to ignore charter boundaries would subvert the evolution of a community defined by a specific set of pedagogical beliefs and behaviors and reliant on immersion and continuity for promoting connection. (Zane, p.132)

In order to be an SWB, a school needs to establish a stable set of teachers who consistently teach the students attending the small school.

stable students

SWBs also struggle to ensure that their students take their core courses inside the small school. Especially when a school is beginning, students often take some of the core courses outside as well as inside the small school. Some SWBs never

escape this situation and operate as a special program through which their students pass for only a fraction of the day. In this situation, time and opportunity for students and teachers to become acquainted and establish a school identity is diminished. One study of SWBs found that students who took three or more of their courses in their SWB performed significantly better academically than students who took fewer than three courses (McMullan et al., 1994). (Students, who took only two classes or fewer in the SWB still outperformed students in the larger school.) In order to create a school environment inside a school, students in an SWB should take all their core courses inside their SWB.

The above definition, however, should not be interpreted too rigidly. Even in established small schools, students often take specialized classes such as gym, art, and music outside the confines of their small school. Because SWBs share principals with host schools, they often collectively support specialized classes such as honors classes in order to maximize their students' educational opportunities. Moreover, it often takes a new SWB a few years to stabilize its student body and teachers inside a school. What is most important is that a young SWB works towards ensuring that all its students share a common academic experience.

SWBs also work to ensure that their students stay in their SWB for an extended period of time. These schools need to secure the commitment of parents and students to stay in the school over time, and to ensure that the larger school consistently assigns the same students to the small school every year. Without this support, the boundaries of the school will become too porous as students flow in and out every year. One Chicago elementary teacher commented that she and another teacher formed their small school because they started to have a strong impact on their students only by the end of the year. By forming a small school and keeping the same students over three years, they hoped each year to build on their relationships with students, their knowledge of students' abilities and skills, and students' relationships to one another in order to improve students' academic achievement. Also, serving the same students over three years enabled them and the other teachers in the school to create a more coherent curriculum that flowed from year to year.

contiguous space

A third characteristic of SWBs is contiguous space. This makes informal interactions among students possible throughout the day. Teachers and students can help one another in classes and be more flexible in their schedules. Moreover, teachers can more easily track their students and work with other teachers in the school. Students pass through hallways that are known and secure instead of anonymous and often ominous. Without contiguous space, it is extremely difficult to break down the isolation from one another that many teachers and students experience. A high school teacher commented that his SWB experienced its most peaceful and productive weeks when the school was physically divided from the rest of the building as part of a general school renovation. The noise and distraction seeping into the SWB from the rest of the building was, for a short time, completely shut out. Another teacher commented that his/her students were “jacked-up” when they returned to the SWB from physical education or music classes held in the general school. Without contiguous space, an SWB has difficulty providing a stable environment, distinguishing itself from the rest of the school, and screening out the disorder often found in its host school.

Obstacles to finding contiguous space range from teachers unwilling to give up rooms they have had for a long time to principals who worry that establishing a common space for an SWB will create divisions inside the host school. Contiguous space, however, is an important factor in an SWB’s capacity to feel “like a school.”

vision

A school vision is the final element that distinguishes SWBs from programs within schools. In our opinion, a school vision sets concrete goals for schools that guide their curriculum. Moreover, the school vision provides the framework with which the school can evaluate itself. For instance, one school’s vision focused on helping students build intellectual and interpersonal connections. The curriculum in the school pushed students to critically think and connect materials across

different subject areas. Another school's vision was to implement the most academically effective teacher practices in their school in order to enhance the ability of their students to become critical learners. This school worked closely with a university partner and its teachers to implement and adapt effective teaching practices in their school. In both schools, the vision guided the everyday practices of teachers and students.

Even if a program has contiguous space, a stable teaching team, and stable students, the school needs a vision to bind together and provide substance for the school. The more interpersonal interactions found in a small school often give rise to more intense professional and interpersonal conflicts. A common vision is important to bind together teachers and students and enables them to navigate conflict.

During one SWB visit, teachers explained that they had formed a small school because their principal supported the idea. The school had become embroiled in a bitter fight among the teachers over the purpose of the school. The conflict undermined any cooperation and teachers continued to teach as they always had, in isolation. In another small school started by a community, the poor articulation of a vision frustrated teachers and parents. After the first year of the school, the majority of teachers left and the student body changed its composition as the school struggled with defining itself. A vision anchors a small school and helps it cope with external resistance while encouraging staff to work collaboratively on focused goals.

In contrast, another small school survived three major organizational shifts because it was founded on a strong school vision of teaching students to live disciplined and rigorous lives. Starting as an SWB, the school soon faced resistance from a new principal and eventually pursued a charter. The strong vision of the school helped it overcome both internal resistance at the larger school and political resistance in founding a new charter school. Moreover, the school's clear vision helped galvanize parental support that proved instrumental in keeping the school open. A vision enables teachers to take advantage of smaller school size to improve students' educational experiences. For its vision to have meaning, an SWB needs the power to implement as well as state it.

SUMMARY

The following characteristics can be used to distinguish SWBs from programs within schools or programs that are developing into SWBs.

Intent. The school needs to purposefully use small size as a vehicle for improving the educational opportunities offered its students.

Stable teaching staff. The teachers need to teach all or the vast majority of their classes inside the small school.

Stable students. Students need to take their core courses inside the school and attend the school for several years.

Contiguous space. The school needs contiguous space so teachers can work collaboratively toward their goals.

Vision. The school needs to have a clearly articulated vision and the power to substantially implement this vision in its curriculum.

VIEWS FROM WITHIN

As we mentioned earlier, visits to Chicago's small schools revealed that the label of SWB was being broadly applied to a variety of activities inside schools. Three cases demonstrate the broad and often confusing use of the term SWB in Chicago and the utility of the defining characteristics we devised.

In order to ease the transition of eighth graders into high school and minimize the dropout rate among freshmen, some Chicago high schools formed freshman academies. Here, freshman teachers and students are grouped together in their own space. Some people consider freshman academies small schools because groups of teachers are cooperating to teach a small number of entering freshmen, approximately 300 to 600. A freshman academy, however, functions more like a program than a school because students spend only a year in the academy, it has only one grade, and teachers work inside both the freshman academy and the larger school.

In one large high school, a group of teachers became excited about founding a small SWB after witnessing the successes of some other small vocational-based schools in their building. They hoped to build a small school around the vocational theme of travel. Energized and supported by their principal, they

formed a team and were struggling to get students to take the majority of their classes inside the small school. Students took classes both inside and outside the program. Although many of the teachers in the program were extremely dedicated and wanted to create a small school, the program lacked many elements of a school. The teachers in the team were scattered across the building, their students took core courses outside the program, and the curriculum was just being designed. This program was in the process of moving from being a program to an actual small school.

In another case, a few primary-grade teachers in a large elementary school were given intense instruction on teaching students reading and math. Students entering the program in their first year were expected to continue their education in a class using the program the next year. An instructional expert helped the teachers implement the curriculum in their classrooms. Most teachers in the school called this program a small school. It was multiyear, had a clear vision, received strong guidance from the instructional expert, and operated relatively autonomously from the rest of the school. On closer examination, however, the program was found to be simply a pilot test for implementing the instructional program throughout the whole school. The instructional expert hoped that successes in implementing the program in the early grades would convince the principal and Local School Council to use the technique throughout the whole school. Moreover, the program was designed to run in any size school as long as students were grouped by their abilities. Even though many people labeled this successful program a small school, examination showed that small size had nothing to do with the substance and success of the program and simply resulted from the fact that the program was being piloted in the school.

These are just a few examples of the broad application of the term “small school” and highlight the need to provide a more precise definition of what constitutes an SWB. School programs’ increasing use of the term “small school,”⁵ coupled with the growing success of the small-schools movement, has increased concern that the term “small school” may become a buzzword with little actual meaning (Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, 1995; Lee & Smith, 1994).

CONCLUSIONS

The vast majority of SWBs are built with the sincere hope of establishing a stable place where students can thrive, learn, relate, and dream. These SWBs, however, often have to fight for the organizational characteristics taken for granted in historical small schools, such as a stable student body, stable teaching staff, contiguous space, and an independent school vision. We do not want our definitions to discourage these efforts. Rather, we want to highlight some organizational characteristics that are key to creating a small-school environment. This enables us to question and challenge why freestanding small schools are normative for many affluent students, while schools educating minority students and students from families with lower incomes have to fight to create small environments.

THE MISGUIDED SEARCH FOR “IDEAL” SCHOOL SIZE

Some researchers and educators have begun to search for the school size that maximizes students' educational outcomes while keeping the cost of schools down. Some school districts, such as New York's, have proposed closing schools that are “too small,” (Hartocollis, 1997), and research reports suggest high schools serving 600 to 900 students produce the highest achievement gains (Lee & Smith, 1997). In contrast, researchers who have conducted more qualitative research on SWBs argue that SWBs cannot be larger than a few hundred students if they are to be successful (Fine, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1993; Wasley, 1997):

Every child is entitled to be in a school small enough that he or she can be known by name to every faculty member in the school and well known by at least a few of them, a school so small that family can easily come in and see the responsible adults and the responsible adults can easily and quickly see each other. What size is that exactly? It can't be too small, but surely it can't be larger than a few hundred! If that strikes us as shocking, we might for a moment look at the size of the average elite independent private school and wonder why we haven't learned this lesson until now. (Meier, p. 117)

A number of teachers commented that as the charters [as SWBs are known in Philadelphia] have continued to expand (from 200 to 400 students), “the seams of the charters feel too tightly stretched.” Some worry that they will soon grow beyond the capacity of their teacher teams to stay on top of the details of charter life or, even more importantly, that the relationship within and between student and teacher groups will begin to suffer. (Zane, p. 131)

Instead of arguing whether the ideal size of a school is 400 or 700, we suggest that a school’s size needs to respond to its context and goals. Keeping in focus that the main reason to have a small school is to foster feelings of community and connection, the size of a school needs to be responsive to other factors that may affect the sense of community in the school. For instance, a school needs to consider its student body, organizational structure, and programmatic foci. A school that serves a traditionally at-risk student population, whose modal experience of school is alienation, may need to be smaller so students and teachers can interact more intensely. Similarly, SWBs may need to be smaller than free-standing schools because SWBs constantly have to negotiate organizational, academic, and social forces in the larger school. In other cases, an SWB may have to be above a certain size in order to gain access and respect from the larger school. Also, a school’s size should be responsive to its vision. If a high school plans to get jobs for all of its seniors, the school needs to make sure its size does not exceed the school’s ability to find students jobs. Below we delineate a few questions that may help schools determine a size that best fits their needs:

How well known are the students and by whom?

How have the students experienced school before coming here?

Are there organizational structures that make interactions among teachers and students harder or easier?

Are there programmatic goals that demand a minimum or maximum number of students?

How does the school interact with the community and parents?

What is the school’s academic program?

What are students’ academic needs?

As these questions suggest, research on “ideal” school size needs to expand to determine whether school size interacts with other contextual variables, such as the average SES of students served by the school and school organization (e.g., freestanding small school or SWB) to predict student outcomes. In addition, research should examine in depth the relationship of school size to student outcomes in several districts to determine if and how size operates differently across different contexts. Instead of trying to fit an ideal school size to all schools, educators and researchers need to explore how smaller school size can be used to improve the educational opportunities offered to the diverse range of students attending our nation’s public schools.

SWBS AS A STRATEGY TO MAKE SCHOOLS SMALLER

The need to understand better the different types of small schools that exist in Chicago and define the characteristics of these schools that allow them to operate as small schools is critical as small schools continue to proliferate nationally. Since the vast majority of new small schools are SWBs, we need to identify the key elements needed to create and operate a new SWB that will improve students’ academic achievement. Furthermore, we need to explore how larger elementary and high schools can be effectively broken down into SWBs.

We identified five characteristics that enable an SWB to operate as a small school within a larger building: intent, a stable teaching staff, stable students, contiguous space, and a vision. In order to operate an SWB as a school instead of a program, educators operating SWBs need to possess or work toward establishing these organizational features. If a school does not possess these characteristics, it is very difficult to attribute its subsequent success or failure to its size because it does not operate as a small school. Moreover, principals and Chicago’s central administration need to support SWBs by aiding and giving them the freedom to implement these basic organizational features instead of forcing SWBs constantly to renegotiate these features on a one-to-one basis from year to year.

Evidence that small schools outperform large schools is growing yearly. Instead of just recognizing that small schools perform better, educators are

founding new small schools often in impoverished communities and often unconventionally inside existing schools in an effort to capitalize on their positive effects. By studying the small-schools movement in Chicago, this project hopes to expand research by studying how small school size can be used as a strategy to improve existing schools and school systems, especially those serving disadvantaged students. By focusing on the definition and variety of small schools in Chicago, this paper highlights the creative methods through which educators have created smaller schools inside the Chicago Public Schools and the need for new small schools to possess organizational features that enable their teachers and students to build strong personal and academic relationships, one of the key factors that make small schools work. In order to maintain these organizational features, small schools need the support of principals and school administrators.

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